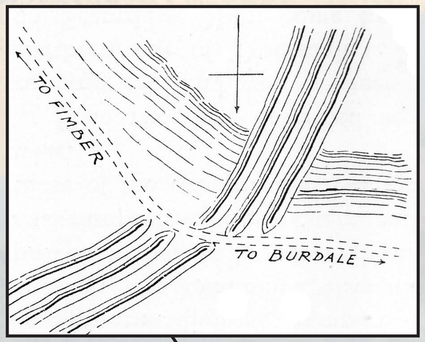
FIMBER : unravelling the past in home territory

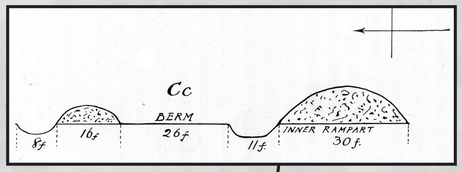
Entrenchments

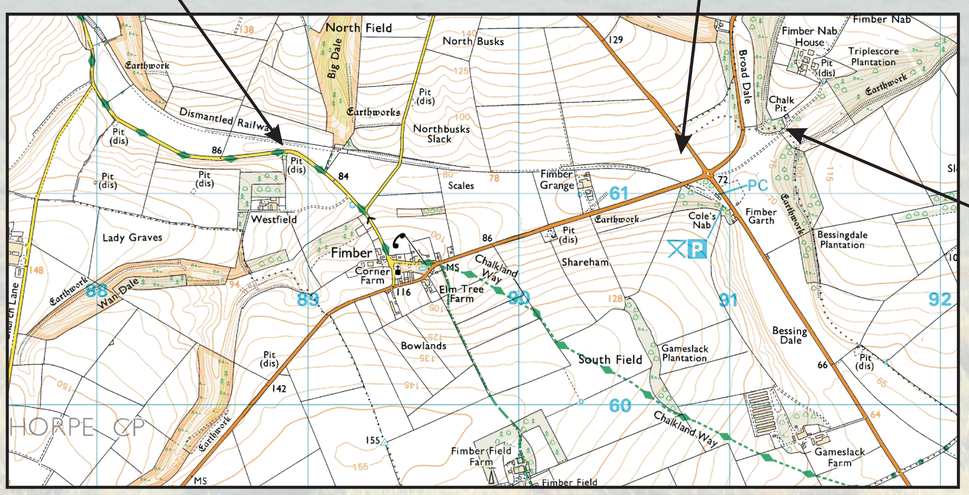
Mortimer spent many years researching the later prehistoric entrenchments, or linear earthworks, which crisscrossed the Yorkshire Wolds. He correctly identified these as ancient land divisions, serving as 'enclosures for family or even tribal boundaries and tribal settlement'. He was of the opinion that they were 'the works of a settled community, who spared no amount of labour to enclose their pasture – and probably, to some extent, tillage – lands, and to protect their homes and herds by the most substantial boundaries and ways of communication then known', and further suggested that they might also have been constructed to control access to water sources.

Modern research has shown that the linear earthworks are not all of the same date, but were constructed and added to at various times from the later Bronze Age into the Roman period.

Only small stretches of these earthworks survive at Fimber, most having been destroyed by agricultural activity since Mortimer's day.







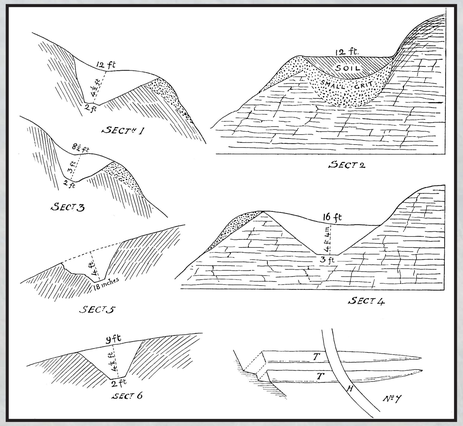
Habitation terraces

Mortimer wrote that these were

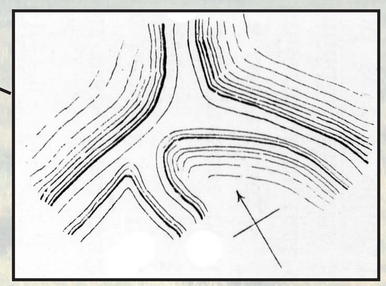
> [Q]uite distinct from any other form of earth-works, and where they remain perfect in outline are remarkably alike in shape and in size. They are unlike the garden terraces, being generally found away from the immediate sites of old villages, and are mostly on that side of the valley which faces the morning or the mid-day sun, at about one-third the distance from the foot of the slope. And are parallel with the course of the valley. They occur in some cases as single platforms, in others as double platforms, whilst sometimes there are three, or even more terraces, running parallel one above another. One end of each terrace is always of full width, while the other end runs out to a fine point; and it is also worthy of note, that when two or more are found arranged like steps, one above the other, they invariably have their wide ends in the same direction. When well preserved, they are found to have a breadth varying from 15 to 21 feet, and a length of 100 to 200 yards.

Modern archaeologists now see these as artificial terraces (known as lynchets) for the growing of crops. They were constructed from prehistoric times right up to the medieval period.

Mortimer's Fimber examples can no longer be seen.



Mortimer's excavated sections across entrenchments at Fimber (precise locations not known).



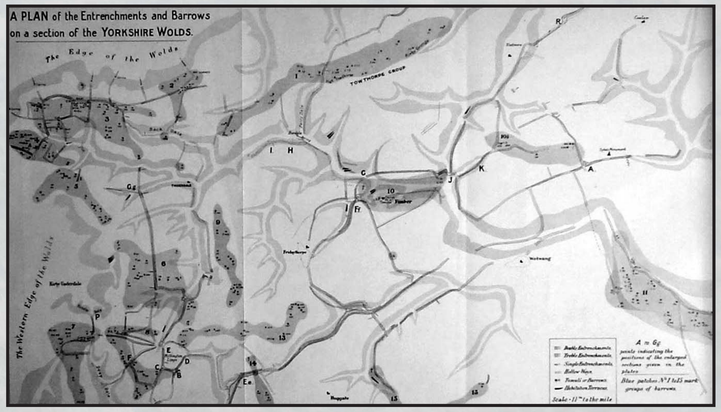
Cultivation terraces

Mortimer described 'cultivation terraces' as

> Quite distinct from the Habitation Terraces … [and] … are parallel strips of land of varying length, one above another, on hill slopes in the vicinity of old villages. They usually run parallel with the hill sides … They owe their existence to the action of the plough, which has removed the soil from the upper to the lower side of each strip of land, eventually producing a ledge with a steep bank on its upper side. These terraces were once bounded by fences, as shown by very old ash and other trees in places still standing at irregular distances along their margins.

These, as Mortimer suggested, are terraces (also known as lynchets) for the cultivation of crops, and can be of any date between prehistory and the medieval period.

Mortimer's Fimber examples can no longer be seen.



Hollow-ways

Mortimer drew attention to what he termed 'ancient sunk roads' or 'hollow-ways', defined by him as 'covered ways, mainly connected with and leading to primitive settlements', and which he thought were older than the linear earthworks; he claimed to have identified a number of these features on the Wolds, particularly around Fimber, describing them as:

> … a very shallow hollow, 5 feet to 8 feet in width, running mainly along the steep and untilled hill-sides', going on 'Where the ground has been tilled and the surface is level no hollow remains, and, as a rule, no trace is visible except at times in the growing corn, when the direction of the filled-up ditch is distinctly seen in the different growth of the corn.

The 'hollow-ways' were interpreted as follows:

> In a wild and wooded district these narrow sunk-ways would be safe and sure guides by day and by night to a rude settlement, to which they undoubtedly lead. They would also protect the primitive settlers during their travels in what was probably then more or less a forest, against sudden attacks of the wild and ferocious animals of that period, which would not choose to enter these narrow trenches. They would likewise assist the hunter to approach unobserved, any animal in the vicinity, he wished to capture; and any large game he might surprise and force into these narrow and deep trenches would have great difficulty in extricating itself, and might be readily driven along the ditches into the central and inhabited enclosure, where its capture would be more easily accomplished. Lastly, they unquestionably denote the fixed settlement of a rude and primitive commune in pre-historic times, earlier even … than the period of double dykes (entrenchments), of which, let me remark, there is no written or oral history, and whose use is entirely forgotten.

Although they may well have been used as routeways, it is now known that 'hollow-ways' were, in fact, linear earthworks, and date to the same periods as the entrenchments.

Like the entrenchments, most of the Fimber 'hollow-ways' have been destroyed at ground level by agricultural activity over the last 100 years.